Annual Site Review 2001 Takes a New Approach

by Joye Alberts

In February of each year, site directors and
teacher leaders from various National Writing
Project sites join forces to respond to the annual
reports from all of the continuing local sites.
This annual peer review process allows NWP to
communicate with sites about their
effectiveness and to learn about interesting work
they are doing. Information from the review
suggests ways that NWP can provide expanded
support for sites and ensure high-quality
programs throughout the network. This past
February, 45 site directors and teacher leaders
from 25 National Writing Project sites gathered
in Berkeley. This year’s review process followed
established patterns, but there were also some
innovative differences.

A Typical Site Review Process

As always, reviewers approached their task
thoughtfully, taking seriously the responsibility
to write helpful letters from the standpoint of a
critical friend. And, as usual, by the time the
reviewers gathered, the review process had been
in motion for several weeks. Long before the
review weekend, each of the table leaders had
begun reading the set of 20 or more proposals
assigned to be reviewed at his or her table. This
prepared the leaders to discuss each site’s
proposal and information package with the
individual reviewer, thus making sure that each
proposal got a careful reading by at least two
responders.

Before responding to a site, a reviewer studied
the site materials extensively, looking at the
current site proposal, previous review letters,
site budgets, and a site profile prepared by
Inverness Research Associates. After studying
this data, reviewers were able to note areas of
strength and challenge at each site.

Differences in This Year’s Review

Despite many “business as usual” aspects to this
year’s review process, veteran review
participants did notice changes in the way this
year’s reading was organized. One such change
was the manner in which the reports were
distributed over the eight reviewer tables. As
part of NWP’s ongoing effort to make the review
more useful to sites, each of the tables was
assigned a particular theme. For example, at one
table, all proposals and readers were from rural
sites. At another table, urban readers
concentrated on urban sites. Some tables looked
at site reports from the same region. Others
considered sites that were part of state
networks. At two tables, “returning reviewers”
team up to respond again to the sites they
reviewed last year. Review planners set up these
experiments to study whether it would be useful
for reviewers at the same table to focus on a
particular category of site.

The planners concluded that the table
assignment approach proved useful and worth
more exploration. For instance, the team
reviewing sites by region found that reading by
region allowed them to distinguish between the
problems of the region and the problems of the
site. In some cases, reviewers were able to refer
one site to another site nearby for assistance.
Reviewers at the “returning reviewers” tables
appreciated the chance to respond to the same
site, referring back to the previous year’s letter.

This year’s review process also boasted the
continuation of the “mining team.” For the
second time this year, a group formed from
NWP publications, technology, and program
staffs worked alongside reviewers, cataloging
“gems”—exemplary programs, ideas, and
approaches—they found in the proposals.
NWP’s leaders are hopeful that many of the
successful approaches revealed in these reports
can be developed into conference presentations,
disseminated through publications, and shared
widely throughout the network.

NWP made these changes in an effort to make
the review process ever more useful to
individual sites. So, following the review, as is
customary, each site received a packet of
information in response to its proposal—a
letter from the reviewer, a site profile prepared
by Inverness Research Associates, and
information about upcoming professional
development and networking events. While
much about the review process remains the
same, review organizers believe that the changes
made this year enhance the quality of the
information each site receives and will
contribute to the vitality of NWP’s sites in the
year ahead.

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